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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses some of the ways basic skills instructors can help students become real learners. The digest argues that the "learning specialist" (a term preferable to "remedial/developmental" reading specialist) should operate from a philosophical perspective stressing strategic approaches to reading-to-learn as driven by the cognitive sciences and recent research in reading pedagogy rather than from a deficit model drawn form the diagnostic-compensatory movement. The digest discusses: (1) implementing a course simulation model; (2) using undergraduate teaching assistants; (3) using high utility strategies for immediate acceptance; (4) promoting students' planning skills; (5) reconceptualizing vocabulary development; (6) training students to use strategies; and (7) using writing to develop reading comprehension and critical thinking. (RS)

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How College Learning Specialists Can Help College Students

by Norman A. Stahl, Michele L. Simpson, and Christopher G. Hayes

The learning specialist should view his/her mission as one of assisting students to become successful, independent learners. One key to moving beyond the "basic skills" approach to college reading instruction lies in adopting an academic orientation of the instructor as "learning specialist" rather than as a "remedial/developmental" reading specialist. With the former, the instructor operates from a philosophical perspective stressing strategic approaches to reading-to-learn as driven by the cognitive sciences and recent research in reading pedagogy. The more traditional skills approach reflects a deficit model (and hence stigma) drawn from the diagnostic-compensatory movement. In this case, the instructor looks upon his/her mission as teaching students specific skills that have not been mastered. This digest discusses some of the ways instructors can help students become learners.

Implement a Course Simulation Model

In a developmental studies program where students are not enrolled concurrently in a credit-bearing, content-area course, consider teaching strategies through a simulation model (Nist & Kirby, 1986). The goal of such a model is to replicate the tasks and texts of a typical lower-division course that most students are required to take after completion of the developmental education requirement. Then throughout the simulation experience, students read and study as the learning specialist teaches the domain-specific study strategies. Students can also receive practice in taking notes with appropriate videotaped lectures or guest lectures from professors who regularly teach the target course. During the lecture presentations the learning specialists should model good notetaking strategies on an overhead projector. The end point of the simulation experience is the passing of an exam like that encountered in the regular course. When students exit the simulation course, they take with them a physical product (marked text and class notes), a cognitive product (greater prior knowledge and experience), and domain specific and general study strategies.

Utilize Undergraduate Teaching Assistants

These assistants should be successful students who possess an academic worldliness, a repertoire of efficient and effective learning strategies, and a desire to pass this "insider knowledge" to another student. These T.A.'s (or even peer tutors) can work with triads, small groups, or with individual students needing intensive assistance or other forms of mentoring. Variations of the mentorship plan can be adapted from the Language Study model (Sartain *et al*, 1982), the Learning Counseling model (Garfield & McHugh, 1978) or the Supplemental Instruction model (Martin, 1980).

Use High Utility Strategies for Immediate Acceptance

Experienced college learning specialists realize that many students enter required reading courses with a negative attitude about having been assigned to a "remedial" class. Consequently, rather than starting the semester with processes that may take several weeks or all term for students to reap the benefits, begin by teaching a high utility strategy that promotes immediate transfer to other course work. Instruction on how to take notes (Stahl *et al*, 1991) from lectures or to use a structured study strategy (Stahl & Henk, 1985) from assigned readings provides such an avenue to immediate use.

Promote Planning

Most developmental studies students must learn to (a) establish goals, allocate resources (i.e., select strategies, allot time), and make a plan of action that incorporates the appropriate strategies over time; (b) have a repertoire of strategies for the numerous tasks and texts encountered in postsecondary learning, since there is no best method to study; (c) select the most appropriate strategies based on the characteristics of text, and personal learning preferences; (d) activate and monitor a plan of action and make appropriate changes, when necessary; and (e) evaluate their plan's success or failure to be prepared for future situations.

Reconceptualize Vocabulary Development

Students entering the milieu of postsecondary education need to understand from the onset that the fundamental avenue for academic success is the ability to expand their vocabulary quickly (Stahl *et al*, 1987). Hence, college learning specialists must provide experiences that immerse students in (1) the "language of the academy" (e.g., terms such as *bursar, financial aid*); (2) the "language of the educated" or the advanced general vocabulary used by scholars as they communi-

CS 010704

cate; and (3) the specialized "languages of the disciplines" or those unique technical terms which permit scholars within a field to communicate effectively and efficiently.

Train Students to Utilize Strategies

One of the primary goals of the college learning specialist is to lead students to become self-motivated and self-directed users and later designers of efficient and effective strategies and tactics of learning. In meeting these goals, consider using a four-step training procedure (Stahl *et al*, in-press) that incudes components of modeling, practicing, evaluating and reinforcing. In the initial modeling the instructor demonstrates the use of a strategy such as a notetaking system during an academic event in a content field class or during the simulation of an academic event in a developmental studies class. During the session/s, the instructor employs think-alouds and self-report strategies to explain his/her rationale for undertaking various tactics as part of implementing an overall notetaking strategy.

After each session is completed, the instructor shares with the students retrospective reports of the perceived successes or failures as well as the rationale for any fix-up tactics employed. As the modeling procedure continues across the training period, under the observation and guidance of the instructor, the students employ the strategy. Opportunities are provided for peer-modeling and group reflection activities as the students master the strategy.

Long-term, monitored practice is undertaken throughout the remainder of the term as students use (or adapt) the learned strategy in a selected course. In order to build confidence with the technique and to promote transfer to new situations, care must be taken to have students practice in a course that specifically lends itself to the strategy. Later the students may branch out to other courses as the strategy becomes second nature to them. As in a simulation model, the instructor must provide appropriate practice materials representative of the content from a range of lower division courses.

Throughout the practice period, each of the students undergoes regular evaluation of her/his strategy usage. For instance, with the Notetaking Observation Training and Evaluation Scales (Stahl, *et al*, 1991) the learner uses an ordered set of objective, scaled criterion behaviors associated with effective notetaking for evaluation and monitoring progress towards becoming an efficient notetaker. Then based on the aforementioned criteria, the instructor or another class member reviews the student's notes and provides feedback on a weekly basis. Like procedures have been described by Simpson (1986). Reinforcement of positive behaviors is received through the ongoing cooperative review sessions and the charting of points across the term.

Use Writing to Develop Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking

A number of tested strategies have been used as an integral step in processes designed to elicit students' prior knowledge, improve reading comprehension, and to teach independent study strategies. Many learning specialists, however, overlook the value of writing to help teach reading (Hayes, *et al*, 1991)—either as a step in a strategy or by itself.

Either way, writing aids help students in becoming co-creators of the texts they read, in creating their own articulated understanding of content material, and in providing a means of monitoring and revising that understanding. For instance, to elicit background knowledge before a new reading assignment, the learning specialist can ask students to freewrite on the general subject of the assignment, to write down all the questions the reading passage's title brings to mind, or to skim first and last paragraphs and main headings in the passage and then freewrite on what they predict the passage will say or even on questions about or objections to what they think will appear in the passage.

The learning specialist can also ask that as students read, they pause for three minutes before going on to the next section to summarize what they have just read. In addition, it's always a good idea to have students reflect on the entire passage during a 10-to 15-minute freewriting response. Such writing not only engages students in the reading material, it also gives them an opportunity to monitor their understanding and to contribute more knowledgeably to class discussions. In a sense, writing about reading material turns the reading process inside out, exposing readers to the inescapable constructivist activity of creating meaning in and from words.

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